

The Ethics of Food Styling and Photography

Fritz Klug
College of Communication Arts and Sciences, Michigan State University
CAS-842-730 - Professional Communication Ethics
Dr. Kristen Wilkerson
May 1, 2022

Introduction

Images play a vital role in advertising. From billboards, boosted posts on social and 30-second television spots, pictures and videos of a product in advertising accompany — and sometimes can be more persuasive than — words. Food and beverage sellers rely heavily on images of their products to help connect with their intended audience, since photos and videos appeal to their emotions, which are tied to how consumers make decisions about what they will eat and drink (Cankul et al., 2021). While the adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” holds true in advertising, how does the audience test the validity of claims these images make, and what are the ethical constraints advertisers should work in?

A recent lawsuit against Burger King grapples with this question head on. Filed in April 2022, the suit claims that the fast food chain “materially overstated” the size of their hamburgers, arguing that advertisements made the food appear to be 35% percent larger than what was actually served (Wile, 2022). This lawsuit isn’t totally shocking — anyone who has ordered fast food from a drive through knows it rarely matches the image on the billboard that caught their attention. But there are still implications of this kind of advertising content, as the plaintiff’s lawyer Anthony Russo told *The Washington Post*: “little situations — what some would consider to be a little situation like this — could lead to unfettered behavior from big corporations,” making misleading ads acceptable (Mark, 2022).

Manipulation of food and beverages for promotional photos and videos has long been documented, and the advertisements are often doubted by their audience. *Consumer Reports* (2014) sent secret shoppers to several fast food chains to see how the food served compares to the images in ads, and the results were starkly different (see images in Appendix A). And consumers seem to already know this: a 2014 *YouGov* survey found that just 25% of its 995 respondents believed claims chain restaurants like *Applebee’s*, *Chili’s* and *Olive Garden* made in their advertisements, while only 16% believed that fast food advertising was accurate (Gammon, 2014). But just because most people don’t expect to be served the exact burger and fries they saw

on TV, the question remains if companies *should* use overly stylized images to promote their products when they know it doesn't match what is served. Advertisers shouldn't just ask how they can make the most aesthetically pleasing version of their product, but if it's ethical. This research paper will look at the ethics surrounding the portrayal of food and beverages in advertisements, what audiences expect and what photographers should consider when creating content.

To style or not to style? That is the ethical question

In photography, there is a whole subindustry for capturing images of food and beverages, and taking the picture is just part of the work. Before the camera shutter is even clicked, the dishes must be prepared and arranged by a food stylist. These are people, sometimes the photographer themselves, who can cook, plate, and arrange the food so it is appealing for the camera — think of a makeup artist for food. There's a wide range of what a stylist can do, from positing a burger on a plate near a window in just the right light to highlight the natural features of the patty, to placing each individual sesame seed on the bun with tweezers. Food stylists work with a range of tools to prepare the food or drink, and some work is done in postproduction with editing software such as Photoshop to further enhance the product.

As food stylist John F. Carafoli writes:

“The food stylist is the person who artfully makes, prepares, and designs food to be photographed. The motivation for creating captivating pictures of food is to persuade — indeed to seduce — the general public into buying a particular product. The food has to appeal to the five senses, yet it must be translated into a single visual image,” (Carafoli, 2003).

The key word in his quote is “designs” — the food stylist creates something that goes beyond the served dish. They are artists who communicate an idea through their medium. “The stylist translates an idea into a photograph and, in doing so, connects the food producer with the consumer,” (Carafoli, 2003). But the work of a food stylist raises several ethical questions

surrounding how much “styling” is appropriate for a product before the image becomes an unrealistic representation of what is being sold. What, then, are the ethics of food styling, photography and visual advertising?

Ethics, broadly defined, is “the study of how people should behave toward other persons... and systems” (Lester et al., 2022, p. 3). Describing if actions are right or wrong is part of ethics, but Normative Ethics expands the definition to how people should act. “Credible alternatives are offered to guide others in what should have been done, so they might do the right thing.” This is the definition of ethics we will use for this study, while we will critique what advertisers and photographers have done, but we will be looking further to how they should act when creating communicate going forward.

Before I get into the discussion on the ethics of food photography, I will briefly discuss what a photograph is and its relationship with the audience who interprets it. Susan Sontag, in her oft-cited essay “In Plato’s Cave” from “On Photography” (1973), says photographs are an “experience captured” (p. 3) and provide proof that something actually happened. The meaning of a photograph comes from the audience who views it. “The ethical content of photographs is fragile,” meaning that, as time passes, “most photographs do not keep their emotional charge,” (p. 21). Photographs are a form of participation in an event (something is happening and is captured by the camera), and, over time, the photograph’s meaning can change since it is tied to that specific time and place in which it was captured. “The particular qualities and intentions of photographs tend to be swallowed up in the generalized pathos of time past” (p. 21). A photograph’s meaning is tied to how its audience interprets it during that time. A picture that shocked people in the 1950s could be viewed as passé today.

So, what does this have to do with photos and videos used for food and beverage advertising? Whatever the specific ethics of different types of photography may be, they are influenced, in part, by the beliefs and expectations of the audience who views them. With the advent of smartphone cameras and social media services like Instagram, the number of

photographs taken, edited and shared has increased exponentially in the past decade. Consumers have also become creators on social media platforms with a basic understanding of how to take a picture, apply filters and digital effects to make something beyond what their eyes saw.

In his book “The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media,” Nathan Jurgenson (2020) surveys photography in the age of the smartphone and social media. Photography, like other forms of art, can “(imbue) additional beauty that one might not have appreciated if not for the image. This is the essence of the picturesque: something that is more pleasing in its mediated representation,” (p. 58). Consumers are taking part in the process of creating, using filters and other editing techniques to enhance photos they’ve taken of their life.

The social photo— and social media in general — is, like photography before it, made of both fact and fiction. We see the world not as something to be neutrally and accurately documented but as something to be manipulated, the material for a story. As it is off the screen, our self-presentation through the social photo is always creative and playful (p. 59).

This begs the question: if more people are taking part in this kind of photography, is it acceptable for brands to continue to do the same? This is an important undercurrent to consider as we discuss the ethics of food and beverage marketing photography.

When it comes to advertisements, there are both legal requirements and industry standards that hold companies to be truthful in what they produce, but it’s become more and more difficult to know who and what to trust with the advancement of technology like deep fake videos and the changing media landscape of “fake news.” Professor of Philosophy Matthew J. Brown said in an interview published in 2022 that

“Anyone who's sophisticated about how photography or video works will tell you that there's a difference between reality and what you see through a camera's viewfinder. The epistemological crisis is getting worse. You can't trust the basic evidence of your eyes

and ears. When you're looking at what appears to be a video of someone making a statement, it could be totally fabricated as a deep fake,” (qtd. in Lester et al., 2022, p. 11). Audiences who view advertisements today have a different relationship with photos and videos than those decades ago, and as it continues to change, so do the ethics surrounding it.

As I critique the ethics of food and beverage advertising photography, let’s look at ethical principles that have been established previously for visual advertisements. In “Visual Ethics: A Guide for Photographers, Journalists and Media Makers,” Paul Martin Lester lays out a test (adapted from work done by Sherry Baker and David L. Martinson in 2001) to evaluate visual ethics of professional persuasion in advertising. The REACTS test has six questions that should be asked by content producers:

R: Is the viewer Respected? The work should maximize the worth and dignity of individuals.

E: Is there Equity between the creator and consumer? The message should be fair and employed without unjustified manipulations.

A: Does the claim seem Authentic? The work should have integrity, sincerity, genuineness, and independence.

C: Is the presentation Creative and does it hold your interest? The work should be clever, fun, and memorable.

T: Is the piece Truthful? The work should be open, factual, and easily defended with clearly stated references.

S: Is the work Socially Responsible? The work should support the common good and lead to a person's concept of a good life. (Lester et al., 2022, pp. 72-73).

This test — particularly the E, A, C and T sections — will help guide this critique to see if different tactics used by photographers, food stylists and advertisers are ethical or cross the line.

Like much in ethics, photography, and any creative endeavor, there is no right or wrong way to do the work, but a spectrum of decisions that a creator must make. This range of ethical decisions made by a food photographer and stylist is best described by food stylist Delores Custer in her book “Food Styling: The Art of Preparing Food for the Camera.” In a section on ethics, she describes a range of “improvements” a photographer or food stylist can make to the product, illustrating it with an example of taking pictures of chocolate chip cookies.

If we are shooting prebaked packaged chocolate chip cookies, we may produce cookies for the shoot by sorting through many packages of product to find the best-looking cookies. We could brush off any crumbs and shoot them. Or we may be asked to warm the chocolate chips slightly before shooting to give them a little glisten (enhance). If the chocolate chips are broken or not showing, we may be asked to add new or more chocolate chips, using either the client's product or purchased chocolate chips (stretch). We may be asked to make fresh cookies using either dough prepared by the client or a recipe and raw ingredients sent to us by the client (stretch). We may be asked to make the best-looking chocolate chip cookies we can using our own recipe and adding chips in just the right places partway through the baking process so they will not blister (cheat). Any of these things can happen on a chocolate chip cookie shoot. (Custer, 2010, p. 16)

I will use Custer's three examples as guideposts in this study and expand upon them, asking why some photographers and editors heavily manipulate their product (cheat) while others take a more editorial approach (enhance), and what are the ethics of everything else in between (stretch). I will explore ethical questions surrounding images of food and beverages used in advertising, but primarily: *is it ethical for companies to manipulate images and videos of food using additives and other procedures to make the products seem more appealing?*

Cheat

Many articles written about food photography and videography used in ads often go to the most extreme examples of manipulation. In her example of what “cheating” looks like, Custer says a photographer might be asked to bake their own cookies instead of the ones the client is selling. But these tricks can go beyond that by using other non-food materials to create the illusion that the product’s qualities are stronger than they actually are. “Cheating” in food marketing photography, therefore, is using other products in place of or adding to the food or beverage that is the subject of the image.

One popular video on YouTube shows some of these tricks (although it's unclear when these are from), such as using glue to give the cheese on pizza more stretch, pumping soap into a pint of beer to create stable foam and spraying down fruit with hairspray to give more shine (5-Minute Crafts, 2019). These tricks accentuate properties of the food product to make them film and photograph better. Photographer Skyler Burt discusses these techniques and shows how they are used, including white glue to replace milk, motor oil to stand in for maple syrup and browning sauce to replace whisky. But these hacks aren’t meant to misrepresent the product. He explains:

It has much more to do with extending the shelf life of that food once it hits the table, because once it does, in fact, land on set, it only has a few minutes before it has to be replaced without the serious help from some food styling magic. And at other times, these food styling tricks help you get shots that would be nearly impossible as far as making the food or the product visible on camera (Burt, 2020).

These tricks try to solve numerous challenges that come with the territory. “Food is among the more difficult of subjects for photographers. The laws of nature guarantee it: Hot foods cool, moist foods dry out, frozen foods melt especially fast under hot lights, vegetables wilt, and fruit turns brown. But determined food photographers rise to these challenges with their

extraordinarily inventive bag of tricks” (Kamps, 2018), which can include washing chicken with detergent to make it shimmer and pinning lettuce on a hamburger (Cankul et al., 2021).

One of the most documented examples of a “cheat” comes from Campbell's soup. In 1968, the company used an image of their vegetable soup where marbles were placed at the bottom of the bowl to elevate the vegetables to the top. “This seemingly innocent effort spark(ed) a Federal Trade Commission probe and (became) the basis for the FTC's efforts to eliminate false ads with a practice that allows it to demand ‘corrective advertising’ from an advertiser that has made a false claim,” (AdAge, 2005). Lawsuits and litigation continued for years before being eventually dropped, but it was one of the most high-profile cases of deceptive food advertising and still influences thinking on the subject today.

Legally in the United States, advertisements for food and beverages must contain the specific food they are marketing, according to the Federal Trade Commission; however, any additional food around the product does not have to be real (Ferro, 2018). But it is not clear how modifications like glue or marbles should be regulated and if they make advertisements dishonest. An FTC spokeswoman told CNBC in 2014 (Little) that “there are no specific FTC regulations governing food photos used in advertising, and the FTC has not pursued any cases alleging that food ads are deceptive based only on the photos.” If materials are added to enhance the food, the onus of if it’s deceptive seems to lie with those who purchase the products. “Consumers frequently purchase food, it’s relatively inexpensive, and it’s fairly easy for a consumer—without any specialized training—to evaluate whether the food they get looks enough like the food in the picture to justify purchasing it again.” The advertising industry also has its own ethical codes established by trade associations, one of which says its agency members should not make “false or misleading statement’s or exaggerations, visual or verbal,” (American Association of Advertising Agencies, 2018).

If non-food items are used just to make the job easier for the photographer, and it’s difficult to tell the difference between the actual and faked product, as some claim, is it an ethical

practice? Authors of a 2021 journal article interviewed 26 food photographers working in Turkey to get their views on food manipulation for photography, (Cankul et al., 2021). While the interviewees said such tricks are only done about 5% of the time, the authors said they are inheriting “ethical concerns” with the practices “as they have the potential to present food and beverages differently from their original state.” However, the authors concluded that such cheats “are not considered to be in an ethical violation of industry standards” in producing “creative food image.”

But just because these practices are considered ethical in the industry (there are many examples in recent history of entire industries acting unethically together), are they ethical in the broader field of visual communication? Going to Lester’s REACTS test, let’s look at the E, A, C, T of this branch of food photography:

- **Equity:** The product is being manipulated. While photographers might think they are justified to help save time and energy, the audience is unaware that glue is being used for milk or the shimmer of a steak comes from non-food additives.
- **Authenticity:** If external materials are used to stand-in for, replace or enhance the food beyond its original state, the images are not genuine.
- **Creative:** Images produced with these hacks are indeed creative, in the sense that a bowl with glue as milk comes off more appealing and holds the audience’s attention more than a bowl of soggy cereal.
- **Truthful:** Truth in photography is hard to define by just viewing the image, but knowing the processes and materials used to create it, images creating by “cheating” are not truthful. Saying “this is a glass of whisky” but it’s actually a mixture of browning fluid is not factual.

It’s unclear how many of these techniques are still actively used in advertising food photography today; it’s also unclear how truthful creators are about their process. But the

techniques outlined above are a far cry from the basics practices and fundamentals of photography.

Enhance

All photographers have a series of decisions to make every time they take a picture. From finding the right lighting to positioning the subject, adjusting the camera's settings to using software to edit brightness and saturation, photography is an art that requires decisions on how to best capture the subject, and food photography is no different.

Photographers often do things to enhance the scene to convey the subject they are photographing. In Custer's example for Enhance, the photographer might open several packages of chocolate chip cookies to find the best ones to photograph, brush off crumbs, or even warm them up a bit to look more freshly baked. While Custer is focused on a stylist's preparation of the food, I am expanding the definition of "enhance" to include common photographic practices, as her examples fall into them.

This is a good time to discuss the ethics of photojournalism. While this paper is focused on photos and videos used in advertising, the rules of news photographers are an important baseline of what is generally accepted as capturing "true" images. The National Press Photographers Association's Code of Ethics says, in part:

1. Be accurate and comprehensive in the representation of subjects.
5. While photographing subjects do not intentionally contribute to, alter, or seek to alter or influence events.
6. Editing should maintain the integrity of the photographic images' content and context. Do not manipulate images or add or alter sound in any way that can mislead viewers or misrepresent subjects. (NPPA, 2017)

While photojournalists would never say they "enhance" an image, they are making decisions on how to best capture their subject with a camera. Like a reporter using words to

describe a scene, a photographer uses their camera as a tool to document the reality of what is happening.

Many food photographers choose to take this more photojournalist approach to their work. One is Lisa Homa. "Early in my career, I assisted on a fast food commercial, and I lasted one day," Homa told *Serious Eats* (Saxena, 2018). "I literally sat in a room for 10 hours gluing sesame seeds on a bun, and I thought 'This is not the type of food styling I want to do.'" While Homa now might go through hundreds of buns to find the perfect one to photograph a hamburger, "there's a difference between finding the perfect bun that already exists and fabricating a new one." Homa aims to have food that looks fresh, "something that just says it's real is best."

An article in *Food52* (Singley, 2018) shows photographer and stylist Matthew Benson's process of photographing a beef shank. After trying several positions, lighting set ups, and garnishes, he ultimately finds the best pose for the meat is standing alone on a plate. Benson focused on the core tenets of photography to find a way to naturally highlight the food without any additives or tricks to make the food appear "better" than it actually is.

Homa and Benson are two food photographers who take a more traditional approach to food photography, focusing on the techniques photographers use such as light, composition, and display. While they may employ some of the other methods discussed in their work, these two articles are good examples of food photographers working in the "enhance" category. A common trait here is photographing food that can still be eaten after the shoot is done. This style may be on the rise due to the changes in audience preference: as more people are taking pictures of their food and sharing to social media, people know what real food looks like in photos and expect to see that in the images they consume (Ferro, 2018).

When running the "enhance" improvements through the REACTS test, it's clearly the most ethical form of food photography. While the process can be difficult to get the desired image, the food and beverages captured are the actual food and beverages with little to no

alteration. The artistic and creative appeal comes from the skills and abilities of the photographer, just like if a professional and an amateur photographer both took the same picture, the professional's would likely be more appealing because of their experience. While the process of creating images for news and advertisements can be the same, the end needs of journalists are different from marketers, who need to communicate specific details of the product they are selling. If “enhancing” and “cheating” are at opposite ends of a spectrum, what should a photographer do when not constrained by the rules of photojournalism, but also doesn't feel right using non-food items to make their subject seem more appealing? There's a whole range of practices that fall into the next category that may be more acceptable, but also more ethically nebulous.

Stretch

Andrew Scrivani is a food photographer who does freelance work for editorial clients like the New York Times and brands like Bumble Bee Tuna, (Scrivani). In his book “That Photo Makes Me Hungry: Photographing Food for Fun and Profit” (2020) he details his process, which primarily focuses on the basic photography principles of light, color temperature, framing, camera settings, composition and table geometry. However, Scrivani also mentions that sometimes he undercooks food to keep their shape, uses blow torches and heat guns to brown meats, and has paint brushes to add moisture to the dish for the camera. He advises to

always remember that we are preparing food for the camera, and not to necessarily to be eaten, although that is the preference. Whenever possible, we want to keep the food edible, but when you have to choose between delicious or delicious-looking, you must default to the latter. (p. 83)

This is the dilemma faced when photographing food: photographers must get the perfect picture, but seldom do natural situations produce it, and, ultimately, it's the final picture that's most important.

Scrivani works in that middle area Custer describes as “stretching,” where the food is manipulated in a way to make it appear better on camera, but doesn’t go so far as faking or using other objects to stand-in for the actual food. These practices fall in line with rules set out by the FTC. While images in advertisements may look different from what is sold, companies and food stylists have contended the images are truthful because they are using the same ingredients and occasionally the same processes as the restaurants, but may spend more time preparing the food to be photographed (Little, 2014).

In a 2012 video, McDonald's Canada lifted the curtain on how their creative agency, Watt International, takes its product marketing photos (McDonald's Canada, 2012). The studio uses all the same ingredients used by local McDonald's restaurants, from the patties, buns, ketchup, mustard and onions, but spends hours preparing it versus the minute it might take a restaurant employee. Preparing a burger to be eaten versus photographed is a different process. For an ad, the picture has to communicate everything about the burger. The agency’s photographer, Neil (no last names are given for the Watt staff), said at the restaurant, employees would line all the condiments on top of each other near the center of the burger. But for the photograph, they want to highlight each of those ingredients, placing the condiments and toppings at the front of the burger as a way to communicate everything it contains. Noah, the food stylist, says they build the burger in this way

because we're in a one-dimensional world in the camera (and) everything is in the back in the picture. (The viewer doesn't) know what's actually in it. This way, we can at least tell people you have ketchup, you have mustard, you have two pieces of cheese, and you know what you're getting. (McDonald's Canada, 2012)

The video shows the Watt team placing each ingredient with care, melting the cheese with a palette knife and placing ketchup with a syringe. They then go to an image editor who removes some of the natural irregularities of the burger using Photoshop editing software. Hope Bagozzi, McDonald's Canada’s director of marketing who hosts the video, says

the less amount of retouching that we do to something, the less perfect it looks. But actually, it looks more appetizing and more convincing... (The editing process is) taking out some of the little accidents that might happen in preparation, which obviously doesn't show the product in its best possible light. (McDonald's Canada, 2012)

(See the differences in Appendix B). Then there is the issue of size: the studio burger looks bigger than the one purchased at the store. Bagozzi says this is due to the boxes the burgers are put in keeps them warm and “creates a bit of a steam effect” which shrinks the bun.

It's important to note that this video is produced by McDonald's Canada, not an independent third party, and could be considered propaganda. But it does provide access and insight no other company has given into how advertising visuals are crafted. The video shows how McDonald's Canada, and likely other fast food brands, stretch how ingredients are used to help communicate what's in the burger. However, is this form of communication truthful and ethical? If they spend hours preparing a burger to be photographed while the restaurant only takes a minute, is that false advertising?

Scott Choucino is a UK-based food photographer who comments on the industry for his YouTube channel, says the tricks he uses, which are similar to those outlined in the McDonald's video, aren't aimed to mislead the audience, but more an attempt to “create the feeling of what the food is going to look like and how you're going to experience it when you receive it at its best,”(Choucino, 2019). He cites the example of the fast food burger looking different in ads than it does at the restaurant. He admits it's frustrating, but the differences come down to staffing and the time taken to cook the dish versus any difference of ingredients. Cameras also have their limits and “photography isn't a true representation of what the eye sees, so sometimes we have to do a few little tweaks to make it look in-camera the same as it looks in real life.” The aim of food photographers isn't to show exactly what the product is going to look like, but what its flavors are going to be. “We are shooting for taste, but I think sometimes it's portrayed that we're shooting for what it's going to look like.”

Food stylist and photographer Nicole S. Young explains it succinctly: “although the beautiful hamburger in the photograph may in fact have been ‘real’ food (with some added stylistic effects), it sure as heck was not realistic” (Young, 2016). This distinction is important and raises questions about what is real and what is realistic. This is all in an ethical gray area. While photographers like Choucino and the team at Watt aim to show all the attributes a menu item or dish might have and how it tastes, photography is primarily a visual medium and there is a basic expectation that what the audience sees is what they get.

Running the Stretch methods above through the REACTS test with a focus on E, A, C, T:

- **Equity:** Compared with the tricks done in the Cheat section, there is a case that the Stretch manipulations are justified. If the goal of the photographer and ad is to communicate what the dish contains and tastes like, and not so much so a realistic representation of what it really is.
- **Authenticity:** This is one of the most difficult questions. The food is the same, but the way it’s prepared is not. The answer may come down to how audiences feel about the advertisements and if they believe a well-prepared fast food dish is an authentic representation of what they order at the restaurant.
- **Creative:** Images produced in this Stretch section are clearly creative and hold interest, as photographers and companies continue to use them.
- **Truthful:** This is a tough one. The facts of the food item, such as a burger, are there, and are defended by its creators. To show a truthful image of what the product contains, the stylist tweaks the product to highlight parts that might be hidden. But photographing for “taste” can be dangerous as it relates to truth because it can be subjective for each person.

When food photographers “stretch,” they maintain they aren’t using tactics that deceive like in the Cheat category, but rather amplify the source ingredients through presentation and editing to help communicate what the product is all about. It’s the most ethically nebulous of the

three areas Custer lays out because of all the nuances that goes into it, but it also gives the most flexibility to photographers to create in an ethical way that not only communicates but appeals to consumers emotions.

The Enhanced, The Stretched, The Cheated

This study of the ethics of food and beverage photography raises many questions about what companies and photographers should do when it comes to capturing images of products for advertisements, as well as the future of such ads in the changing media landscape. The tactics used to “Cheat” a photograph are ethically unjustifiable: using materials that aren’t found in the product to enhance it is lying to and deceiving the audience, and the methods of the Enhance section are pretty rock solid by photojournalism standards. But once photographers start wading into the “stretching” waters, where the majority work, ethics can get murky very fast. Just because they are using the same ingredients in the product as sold and is “real,” as Young says, it might not be “realistic.”

Professionally, I work in marketing for one of the largest craft breweries in the country. My job involves managing an in-house team and working with agencies to produce photos and videos of our food and beverages for organic social media and paid advertisements. Having previously been a photojournalist, I had primarily considered myself in the Enhance camp. But as I conducted this research, I’ve realized how many times I’ve stretched a product, going beyond the basic practices of a photojournalist to get a picture that is visually appealing for the medium, including stirring up a pint of beer to create larger-than-poured foam to make the product more appealing to the camera. I had always said I would do nothing to our product that would make it not consumable, but I realize there are things that can be done before that red line is crossed that could be considered deceptive (although I don’t believe I’ve done any of those, but have been tempted to get close). When considering the work of photographers, these are complex questions, but in the end, I’d say it’s ethically safe to practice the Enhance methods and be very careful when “stretching.” But I’ve also had the same questions that many of the

photographers talked about in this paper: when is a photo a documentation of an object and when does it become something more artistic to express and describe its characteristics and the emotions the object invokes?

Photography, while rooted in capturing events happening in the world, is not inherently realistic, as Sontag and Jurgenson write. Creative work involves a series of technical choices to communicate a truth through a specific medium, and the photographer has to make decisions on how to share information using a camera. While photography has a history of being a tool to document the world as it's seen, there are many factors that go into an image's meaning, including when it was taken and the audience who views it. The process of photographing food has become, in a way, democratized, as consumers have become co-creators with brands on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, so the meaning is likely changing. The process of taking a picture, editing and sharing it have become commonplace, and the ethics of consumers have the potential to influence those of advertisers.

As noted above, only 25% of consumers believe chain restaurant advertisements and 16% percent believe what's coming from fast food chains. With this lack of trust, as well as the shift in how consumers are interacting with photography in the age of social media, has there been a shift in how brands approach using food photography in their ads? A brief survey (Appendix C) I conducted of Instagram posts from the top seven fast food brands (with Wendy's removed due to incomplete data) in 2021 and 2019 (2022 was skipped due to the COVID-19 pandemic) found that the brands only included photos of food and beverages 54% of the time in 2021, down 4.7% from 2019. And individual brands bigger drops: McDonald's used product photography 10.7% less in 2021 than 2019, and Starbucks 8.4% less in the same time period. While not a complete analysis of all of their marketing efforts, Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms and is driven by photos. The trend numbers are interesting, but require further research to see if food and beverage brands are using less product photography with the rise of social media and if there are any ethical underpinnings driving such decisions.

While my fundamental beliefs regarding the ethics of food and beverage photography in advertising remain mostly the same — that there should be some semblance of truth in the pictures used in advertisements — I’m also curious how consumers interacting with photography and image manipulation on social media has changed their views of images brands use in marketing. Will consumers be more aware of cheats and stretches and seek out more authentic images, as some have argued, or will they accept the doctored images for what they are and embrace them as they create similar content for their Instagram feeds? More research is required on this, but I am interested in learning and see if these changes would change the ethics of this kind of creative communication.

How Much is “a Pinch of Salt?”

When a chef writes a recipe, they list all the ingredients and processes to prepare the dish. While the details are often fairly exact, there are some instructions that are left to the discretion of the person cooking it. A “pinch of salt” might mean different things to different people, and a little more or a little less might not drastically change the recipe. But if the person in the kitchen adds in a handful of salt, the dish as envisioned no longer exists. While there is room for flexibility, it is also clear when the line is crossed. This is a good analogy looking back at the main question of this study: *is it ethical for companies to manipulate images and videos of food using additives and other procedures to make the products seem more appealing?* The answer to that is it ultimately depends on the intention of the creator, the tools they use as well as the relationship they have with their audience. The ethics on how they act should be guided by truth and authenticity to avoid deception, but what that means is different to each creator, and without any real legal enforcement or way to compare and document visual claims, the decisions will likely remain with the creators as they do the work. But if their customers see the ads with manipulated images, buy the product and are satisfied with their experience, is there any real deception? Lawsuits like that filed against Burger King and articles from publications like Consumer Reports comparing the differences between ads and real produces show that this is

still a topic worth discussing. Each company and photographer needs to question the choices they make each step of the creative process, and performing something like the REACTS test is a good way to continue to think about the ethics of the work they are creating. Ultimately, companies don't want to spend time and money producing advertisements only to have customers ask, like in that classic Wendy's commercial, "where's the beef?"

Appendix A: Photos from Consumers Reports

Here are some of the images from the Consumers Report article (2014) that best illustrate some of the methods described above.

McDonald's: Sausage McMuffin with Egg



Dunkin' Donuts: Wake-Up Wrap with Bacon



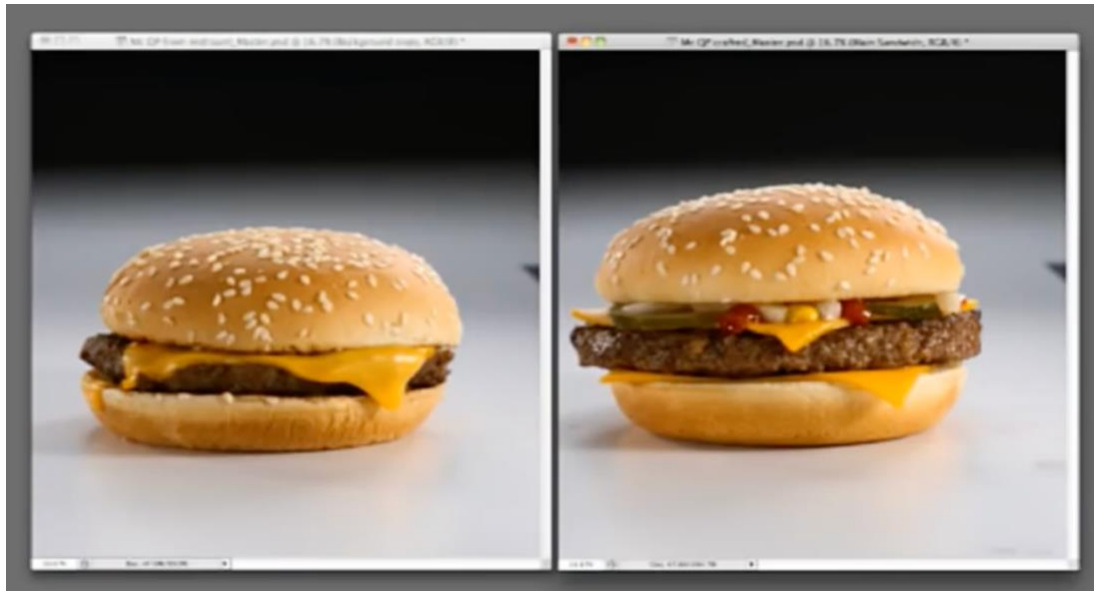
Subway: Chipotle Steak & Cheese with Avocado



Appendix B: Screen grabs from McDonald's Canada video

These screengrabs from the McDonald's Canada video (2012) that show the differences between the burger from the store and what the Watt Agency created in the studio.

Screengrab at 2:43



Screen grab at 3:19



Appendix C: Instagram data from 2019 and 2021

Here is data collected about the number of Instagram posts from brands that include stylized food and beverage photos from 2019 and 2021. Posts from 2020 were skipped due to the COVID-19 pandemic and changes of what brands posted on social media. All data was collected and analyzed by me.

- McDonald's: 82 posts with 17 (21%) featuring food or beverage photography (down 10.7% from 2019).
- Starbucks: 238 posts with 133 (55%) featuring food or beverage photography (down 8.4% from 2019).
- Subway: 186 posts with 140 (75%) featuring food or beverage photography (down 5.9% from 2019).
- Taco Bell: 136 posts with 82 (60%) featuring food or beverage photography (up 14.6% from 2019).
- Chick-fil-A: 111 posts with 39 (35%) featuring food or beverage photography (down 12.2% from 2019).
- Wendy's: 48 posts with 17 (35%) featuring food or beverage photography (Wendy's doesn't have any posts for the first half of 2019).
- Burger King: 109 posts with 71 (65%) featuring food or beverage photography (down 31.8% from 2019).

	2021 Posts	2021 posts w/ Food	2021 Percentage w/ food	2019 posts	2019 posts w/ Food	2019 Percentage w/ food
McDonalds	82	17	20.73%	35	11	31.4%
Starbucks	238	133	55.88%	185	119	64.3%
Subway	186	140	75.27%	117	95	81.2%
Taco Bell	136	82	60.29%	81	37	45.7%
Chick-fil-A	111	39	35.14%	243	115	47.3%
Wendy's	48	17	35.42%	45	12	26.7%
Burger King	109	71	65.14%	66	64	97.0%
Total	910	499	54.84%	772	453	58.7%
Total w/o Wendy's	862	482	55.92%	727	441	60.7%

References

- American Association of Advertising Agencies. (2018, August 1). *4A's standards of Practice*.
4A's. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://www.aaa.org/4as-standards-practice/>
- Burt, S. (2020, November 20). *Unbelievable Tricks Photographers Use To Make Food Look Delicious / This IS NOT REAL*. YouTube. Retrieved April 29, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1hMKy3-4eU>
- Cankul, D., Ari, O. P., & Okumus, B. (2021). The current practices of food and beverage photography and styling in food business. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Technology*, 12(2), 287–306. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jhtt-02-2020-0052>
- Carafoli, J. F. (2003). Tempting the palate: The Food Stylist's art. *Gastronomica*, 3(2), 94–97. <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2003.3.2.94>
- Choucino, S. (2019, August 5). *Professional food photographer reacts to food styling hack videos*. YouTube. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cyyezyV3Gg>
- Code of ethics*. NPPA. (2017, November 28). Retrieved April 29, 2022, from <https://nppa.org/code-ethics>
- Consumer Reports. (2014, February). *Fast food not as pictured: Fast Food - Consumer Reports*.
Fast Food Not As Pictured | Fast Food - Consumer Reports. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from <https://www.consumerreports.org/cro/magazine/2014/02/fast-food-not-as-pictured/index.htm>
- Custer, D. (2010). *Food styling: The art of preparing food for the camera*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Ferro, S. (2018, August 22). *How fake is food styling?* Fast Company. Retrieved April 29, 2022, from <https://www.fastcompany.com/3034644/how-fake-is-food-styling>

- From marbles in the soup and Ray Kroc's new franchise to Ed Artzt and the birth of online marketing -- it's ad age's biggest moments in the last 75 years.* Ad Age. (2005, March 28). Retrieved April 28, 2022, from <https://adage.com/article/75-years-of-ideas/biggest-moments-75-years-advertising-history/102695>
- Gammon, J. (2014, April 8). *Truth in advertising: 50% don't trust what they see, read and hear.* YouGov. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from <https://today.yougov.com/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2014/04/08/truth-advertising-50-dont-trust-what-they-see-read>
- Jurgenson, N. (2020). *The social photo on photography and Social Media.* Verso.
- Kamps, H. J. (2018, March 25). *The dirty tricks of Food Photographers.* Medium. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from <https://medium.com/photography-secrets/food-photography-35a60c2f0d14>
- Lester, P. M., Martin, S. A., & Smith-Rodden, M. (2022). *Visual ethics: A guide for photographers, journalists, and media makers.* Routledge.
- Little, K. (2014, May 19). *Why restaurant meals don't look like the ads.* CNBC. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from <https://www.cnbc.com/2014/05/19/why-restaurant-meals-dont-look-like-the-ads.html>
- Mark, J. (2022, April 6). *Burger King Whopper 35 percent smaller than in ads, lawsuit says.* The Washington Post. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/04/06/burger-king-whopper-class-action-florida/>

- McDonalds Canada. (2012, June 19). *Go behind the scenes at a McDonald's photo shoot / McDonald's*. YouTube. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oSd0keSj2W8&t=2s>
- Saxena, J. (2018, August 10). *Back of the house: What does a food stylist do?* Serious Eats. Retrieved April 29, 2022, from <https://www.serioseats.com/food-lives-what-does-a-food-stylist-do>
- Scrivani, A. (2020). *That photo makes me hungry: Photographing Food For Fun & Profit*. The Countryman Press, a division of W.W. Norton & Company.
- Scrivani, A. (n.d.). *Andrew Scrivani - Bio*. scrivani. Retrieved May 1, 2022, from <https://www.andrewscrivani.com/bio>
- Singley, N. (2018, September 26). *What it takes to get "The beauty shot," as told by a food stylist*. Food52. Retrieved April 30, 2022, from <https://food52.com/blog/18076-what-it-takes-to-get-the-beauty-shot-as-told-by-a-food-stylist>
- Sontag, S. (1973). *On Photography*. Picador.
- Wile, R. (2022, April 4). *Burger King accused of false advertising in lawsuit alleging whoppers are too small*. NBCNews.com. Retrieved April 25, 2022, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/business/consumer/burger-king-false-advertising-lawsuit-whopper-burgers-rcna22916>
- Young, N. S. (2016). *Food photography: From snapshots to great shots*. Peachpit Press.